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The impressionist tale as a way to negotiate the challenges of ethnography in field missions for international organisations

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this article is to explore the challenges that a researcher in Interpreting Studies may encounter in writing an ethnographic account of a field mission, being herself an internal observer and working as a conference interpreter for an organisation to which she has pledged allegiance. The article reports reflexively on dilemmas and challenges in conducting the research from an insider position. It demonstrates the ways in which the reflections on these dilemmas and challenges were used to reach a decision on the type of ethnographic account to write. After exploring some forms of ethnographic accounts, the article argues that an impressionist tale is a suitable approach when the researcher is part of the researched subjects and when she and her colleagues are the main characters in a delicate and emotionally charged environment characterised by the need to safeguard confidentiality and anonymity.

1. Introduction

Whilst interpreters have been systematically recruited to work in conflict zones and in post-conflict situations, their presence in such settings has only recently become visible. Works in this field adopt different approaches: some adopt a historical stance (e.g. Baigorri Jalón 2021; Delisle and Woodsworth 2012; Ruiz Rosendo and Baigorri Jalón 2023; Ruiz Rosendo and Persaud 2016; Takeda and Baigorri Jalón 2016), others delve deeper into the interpreter's work in contemporary conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, Afghanistan and the Balkans (e.g. Baker 2010; Dragovic-Drouet 2007; Footitt and Kelly 2012; Inghilleri 2008; Ruiz Rosendo and Persaud 2019) but also in Africa (Tedjouong and Todorova 2022). Other studies do not focus on a particular conflict but analyse the interpreter's role in the context of: specific humanitarian organisations (Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche 2018; Todorova 2016); military operations (Gómez Amich 2017); and war reporting (Palmer 2007). Yet others carry out a granular analysis of a specific aspect related to the interpreter's work, such as ethics (Tryuk 2020), the interpreter's positionality and agency (Gómez Amich 2021; Ruiz Rosendo 2020b); the interpreter's loyalty (Luo and Ruiqi 2021; Takeda 2021); the role of emotions and psychological implications (Ruiz Rosendo 2020a; Barea Muñoz 2021b) or security issues and the interpreter's protection (Juvinall 2013).

Studies are usually based on interviews carried out with the interpreters themselves, where they relate the difficulties and challenges they have faced as a result of their complex positionality. However, such interviews rarely involve trained conference interpreters working for international organisations and who are deployed in field missions, leading to a scarcity of academic research relating to this category of interpreters, with the exception of Ruiz Rosendo and Barea Munoz (2017), Barea Muñoz (2021a), Ruiz Rosendo, Barghout, and Martin (2021), and Barghout and Ruiz Rosendo (2022).

These latter studies examine fully-fledged conference interpreters, who have a clear mandate stemming from the fact that they are recruited by an international organisation. However, in the field they are confronted with unfamiliar and unusual settings and legal, psychological and ethical implications, as well as with particular security matters. Even when such usual settings are directly or indirectly related to conflict, a field mission deployed by an international organisation does not necessarily take place in a conflict zone. Along these lines, Ruiz Rosendo, Barghout, and Martin (2021) define field missions as an event that takes place in locations outside of the organisation's duty station and which does not take place in a conference setting. Consequently, literature on interpreting in conflict zones is, sometimes, only partially relevant to the study of interpreting in field missions. Furthermore, conference interpreters who work in field missions are defined as trained interpreters who work in the organisation's headquarters but who are sporadically deployed to the field because they speak the relevant languages. This makes them a very specific category, and, in particular, runs contrary to the traditional profile of an interpreter working in a conflict zone, usually defined as untrained, locally-recruited individuals who happen to work as an interpreter because they speak the relevant languages and not because they have been trained in interpreting.

Drawing on an ethnographic study in the context of a field mission, this article explores the major challenges that a researcher who also worked as an interpreter (henceforth 'participant-researcher') faced as a consequence of this dual role, and examines some potential solutions to overcome these difficulties. The aim of the study was to write an ethnographic account of the challenges faced by conference interpreters who work in an international organisation when they are deployed to a conflict zone. The participant-researcher was motivated to carry out such a study given the scarce references to this category of interpreter working in this context in available literature, including in the final report of such field missions (which, despite their detail, rarely mention interpretation at all).

2. Ethnography in interpreting studies

Ethnography, by its very nature, has a double meaning: on the one hand, it is an approach based on data collection; a qualitative research method based on tangible facts that are obtained through direct observation and participant observation, as well as through interviews and informal exchanges with interlocutors. On the other hand, it is the result of the research, a detailed text written as an account (Clifford and Marcus 1986) within a wider social context. Such a method requires a field presence that allows the researcher to observe a wide spectrum of interactions at different times and in different circumstances that she analyses in order to draw patterns, values or social schemes.

Ethnographic field work has been used as a valid qualitative method in Interpreting Studies for reporting on the work performed by interpreters in their natural setting by both outsider (Kunreuther 2020; Kunreuther et al. 2021) and insider researchers (Delgado Luchner 2015, 2019; Duflou 2016; Hokkanen 2017). Anthropologist Laura Kunreuther examines the experiences of interpreters who worked for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) during its mission in Nepal by carrying out a conversation with them. Delgado Luchner (2015, 2019) analyses the 'Nairobi project', a Master's programme in Conference Interpreting in the University of Nairobi launched in collaboration with various sponsors, by using a participant-observer paradigm. Hokkanen (2017), in her study on simultaneous interpreting during church services, defines herself as a participant-researcher, and uses autoethnography to contribute to the analysis of embodied somatic and affective field experiences. Finally, Duflou (2019) uses her position as a member of the community of practice under observation to explore the skills that conference interpreters working for the European institutions need to acquire in order to cope with their professional tasks, through observation, in-depth interviews and the analysis of institutional documents. Despite the existence of these works in Interpreting Studies which make use of ethnography, to our knowledge no ethnographic studies have been carried out to examine the role of conference interpreters who are deployed to the field by an international organisation.

3. The study

The present study was conceived in the context of a doctoral thesis,[1] which aimed to identify the challenges that conference interpreters face in field missions in the framework of an international organisation.

The choice of which mission could serve as the object of the study was dictated by the availability of field missions dispatched by the international organisation and by certain criteria established by the authors. In order to carry out an ethnographic study, the mission had to be long enough to allow the participant-researcher – the first author of this article – to observe the interpreters in different working settings, ranging from official meetings with local authorities and their representatives, to interviews with members of civil society and meetings in detention centres. Understanding that the study would necessarily be a short-term ethnography (field missions are rarely very long), we considered that three days was the minimum possible duration of the mission, otherwise we would not have had enough data to extrapolate the possible elements of an ethnographic narrative. A reasonably long period compensates for the moments of arid observation, where what is observed is not of great value and does not deserve to be reported, with other moments which are rich in useful details.

Furthermore, we decided to observe more than two interpreters, (in addition to the participant-researcher) as this would allow us to gather more information on how the interpreters interact with the different users and amongst themselves, thus going beyond the autoethnographic account. The mission we eventually selected attracted our attention because of its duration (ten days) and the variety of stakeholders and places. The gender dimension was also taken into consideration, by choosing a mission where two male interpreters and two female interpreters were assigned.

3.1. Participant observation and direct observation

The direct and participatory observation method (Creswell 2009) was employed in this study. The participant-researcher had to carry out a reflexive examination of her positionality to understand the different obstacles. She was a staff conference interpreter at the international organisation to which she had pledged allegiance and who was studying her own work and that of her fellow interpreters as an insider (Berger 2015). Indeed, duality is often a source of difficulty in ethnographic research (Labaree 2002). The interpreter, while carrying out her work, must abide by the rule of confidentiality (a sine qua non condition for interpreters), and by a clear code of conduct (applicable to all officials of and persons under contract with the organisation): these aspects can be very restrictive for the research element, since under no circumstances can professional comments exchanged during a mission be reported, whether interpreted or not. Likewise, the nature of the mission, its composition, and the locations where it takes place cannot be disclosed.

Despite these challenges, this position as both an interpreter and a researcher allowed her to directly observe colleagues' workflow and interactions, as well as to observe her own work and interactions. In both cases, the observation was participatory as a member of the interpreting team. Given that the participant-researcher could be asked to interpret at any time, she was unable to observe the exchanges between the different parties (the delegation of the international organisation, its counterparts in the country visited, as well as the interpreters) uninterrupted. However, this approach also allowed her to anticipate situations or issues that she might have wanted to relate in her story. Such an approach is exhausting since, in addition to observing the work of colleagues, the participant-researcher had to be able to pick up the thread of the interpretation at any time if a colleague felt tired.

Note-taking was an important method for systematic information gathering. Notes were always taken in the same notebook, which the participant-researcher kept with her at all times. During the mission, during breaks and while colleagues were working, impressions, comments, snippets of sentences concerning the work and the conditions surrounding it, as well as the work of the interpreters, were noted down in the notebook. The notes collected included four main categories: descriptive notes focusing mainly on the framework of the discussions, the participants, the techniques used as well as other variable elements in the form of snippets or a concise title; notes sketching a rough analysis of the situations encountered and of the major themes, the outlines of which were traced during the observation; forward-looking notes indicating the elements that required further observation at future meetings and which also highlighted aspects to be checked; and personal reflections encompassing mostly subjective impressions and anecdotal descriptions which provided an opportunity to reflect on the researcher's reflexivity.

Throughout the mission, three interpreting modalities were used: consecutive, whispering, and use of the *bidule* (portable technology allowing for simultaneous interpreting without the need for a booth). The use of these different techniques varied from place to place, although the interpreters frequently resorted to classic consecutive with notes. To distinguish between her ethnography notes and her consecutive notes, as well as the numbers and dates that she wrote down to help her colleague, the participant-researcher

noted her own comments and impressions in another colour, according to recommendations provided by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011).

Observations written in the margins of the research notes during the working day were cleaned up every evening in a logbook, where a more articulate reflection was written. This rewriting allowed to sort and keep those comments that could be used when writing the story. As the mission progressed, repetitions were crossed out to retain only the most representative comments. Scattered and truncated ideas were written in a clearer and more extensive form. Indecipherable scribbles were eliminated. From time to time, the researcher would title the idea by determining its category, for example writing next to a paragraph 'psychological implications' or 'dialect difficulty' in order to facilitate subsequent data analysis. The collection of data during the mission was initially dictated by the aim to present a typical field mission and define its outlines. The researcher had previously participated in field missions and knew that they generally followed a standardised format, namely that members of the delegation visited public places (according to their mandate) and met with government officials and civil society representatives. The locations to be visited were usually mentioned with the mission programme, with occasional exceptions for security or confidentiality reasons.

For this study, we did not particularly require data that told us about the type of interactions to be encountered in the field, or even the different users of the interpretation services. The narration did not mean exploring interpreting technicalities that the interpreters usually know well. In this case, the specific purpose of gathering observational data was to explain what makes these missions different and challenging. The criteria used was above all the emotional charge that the interpreter felt during the work, especially when it forced her to make quick and complex decisions or seemed to affect her cognitive abilities in a challenging setting. To evaluate this emotional charge and while gathering observational data, the researcher used herself as her own primary research subject (Butz and Besio 2009) by assessing the difficulties she was experiencing herself in her own autoethnography before conducting the interviews with her colleagues.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Observation data were complemented by an interview. Two out of the three interpreters who participated in the mission accepted to be interviewed by the researcher, in order to collect their impressions and feedback (Creswell 2009). The interviews took place some time after the mission, when the researcher realised that the involvement of colleagues who had participated in the mission could enrich the story. Their participation allowed her to complete her own observations, to put them in a new light or to integrate elements and aspects that were not in her notes. They were conducted on an online platform and were recorded with the written informed consent of both participants.

Obtaining the participants' prior consent for the ethnographic study represented a double problem. To begin with, the selection of participants could not be made upstream because the researcher did not know if, in addition to the interpreters, she was going to include participants chosen from among the members of the organisation delegation. Ultimately, this would have disclosed too much information about the mission and it would therefore have been difficult for the researcher to anonymise the data

afterwards. Respect for confidentiality in general made it difficult to speak with both the interpreters and the other members of the organisation delegation without revealing too much information about the mission.

Furthermore, it was not possible to anticipate all the potential interactions that could have taken place with parties other than the organisation delegation (third parties). The participant-researcher was well aware of the problem that confidentiality would pose, given that the organisation would likely reject a research project based on observation or even on interviews with third-party actors on the ground. Moreover, and regardless of the participants selected, she could not anticipate the duration of the observation (it is impossible to know how much data is required to be able to design categories), the expected objectives (as that might prejudge the results) or even where the observation would take place (giving the constantly changing nature of the programme) nor which places would be mentioned in the final account.

Once the scope of participants was limited to interpreters participating in the mission, ethical considerations were more easily resolved. First of all, there was no longer any asymmetry between the participants and the participant-researcher: they all belonged to the same organisation, all had the same functions and the latter did not rank higher than any of the former. Their participation in the research was therefore entirely voluntary, guided by a genuine desire to share their experiences.

3.3. *Data analysis*

Data analysis started inductively, with a thorough reading of the notes and interviews, drawing on Corbin and Strauss (1990) grounded theory. Categories were then identified and were gradually refined and organised hierarchically. Links between categories were then established. Higher-level themes were used as a structure on which the narrative was based, while the lower-level categories were used to code the data. The coding of data aimed to group the data collected during the field observation and through the individual testimonies (gathered through the interviews).

After a process of reflexive iteration, significant statements were arranged into categories and then collapsed into higher level themes. A total of nine categories were identified: interpreting for the organisations of the civil society; detention centre facilities as a setting; arrival in the country; preparing for the mission; decisions made by the interpreter; challenges; cultural elements; interactions between colleagues during the mission and morale; and psychological implications (during and after the mission).

3.4. *Writing an account*

The third step of the analysis consisted of writing a narrative based on the data. In ethnographic studies, the aim is to write an account that presents findings to relay the genuine experiences of the participants. However, one of the challenges that the researcher faces is avoiding an authoritative stance when writing the account. Additionally, conveying experiences creates the 'inescapable problem of representation' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 1). Therefore, transporting the participants' spoken words and the notes taken during the observations, as well as the researcher's own experiences, into an academic account requires a careful examination of the researcher's power, not only

'because of the possibility of differences between the real words of the interviewees and the academic text as rendered by the author, but because of the possibility that the words can be appropriated to advance the researcher's interests' (Kim 2012, 138). This is particularly the case when the author is an insider. The aim of any ethnography is to present events as seen through the participants' eyes, including those of the researcher; a cooperative narrative based on different life stories, giving rise to a joint production or a polyphonic text (Canevacci 2012). In the present study, this represented a major difficulty that had to be overcome without breaching the obligation of confidentiality in its strictest sense.

Confidentiality, through this prism, encompasses the names, places, nature, and content of the exchanges but also any political opinions. To write the story while remaining anonymous, pseudonyms must be used to indicate participants and locations (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). This confidentiality is all the more important as the community of interpreters who participate in these missions is small, and therefore 'the researcher must be particularly vigilant when his research is addressed (at least in part) to the restricted community in which he has been able to investigate' (Zolesio 2011, 6). However, it was decided that the gender of the participants be revealed to reflect the different dynamics that can be created in the presence of participants of different genders in specific contexts.

For this study, the use of pseudonyms and the omission of identifying information was not enough to guarantee confidentiality. Consequently, another important aspect was which type of ethnographic account to choose. To do so, the authors of this article had to decide what information they were allowed to share about the participant-interpreter's work, the work of her colleagues and the functioning of her organisation (Humphrey 2013), and how to share it without compromising the ethical principles governing her work. A necessary step before creating such narrative was to identify the different kinds of ethnographic account.

3.5. Ethnographic accounts

Van Maanen, in his seminal work *Tales of the field* (1988), mentions three kinds of ethnographic narrative: the realist, the confessional and the impressionist. The most widespread and recognised narrative among researchers has traditionally been the realist narrative which, as the name suggests, is grounded in factual reality encountered in the field. One of its fundamental features is the almost total absence of the author, because, once the data collection from the field is completed, the researcher disappears behind the narrative and reinforces in the reader a feeling of trust in the ethnographic account. Nevertheless, Van Maanen (1988, 46) does not hesitate to criticise the teller by saying that 'ironically, by taking the "I" (the observer) out of the ethnographic report, the narrator's authority is apparently enhanced, and audience worries over personal subjectivity become moot'.

The confessional narrative seems a reaction to the questioning of the scientific rigour of the realist approach. It reveals the techniques used during the fieldwork, the difficulties encountered and overcome, thus seeking to create an intimacy with the readers by revealing the process followed in the field, its shortcomings and strengths. This characteristic is often strengthened by the author's critical self-portrait but also by the prowess

in the field recounted by some authors. It allows the reader to 'get a sense of the author's approach and biases, as well as the methodological lessons learned while conducting the research' (Ciambrone 2004, 2).

The impressionist tale describes 'the doing' in the field and not 'the doer' or 'the done', by using metaphors, imaginative recall and imagery to draw the reader into a dramatic story (Gullion 2016). It is intended to engage the reader with a stark description of unique findings. According to Van Maanen (1988, 102), 'impressionist tales ... reconstruct in dramatic form those periods the author regards as especially notable and hence reportable'. As such, the researcher 'brings unusual stories forward to speak for themselves' (Ciambrone 2004, 2). In our view, however, stories do not speak for themselves insofar as the research conditions their message through the choice of which stories to share. We see this act of choice as a process whereby, like an artist working on a canvas, certain details are illuminated while leaving certain areas of shadow, without disturbing the reader's gaze.

In the last decade there has been an increasing interest in new types of account that analyse alternative possibilities of collective existence and that explore new ethnographic trends, such as fictionalised ethnography or flash ethnography (McGranahan and Stone 2020). This supports the plea for ethnographic responsibility to be based on a less academic and more practical perspective (see Wolf 1992). Fictionalised ethnography learns from and is based on art and literature as a mode of engaged creative practice (McLean 2017), and allows for a more radical approach to anonymisation, whereby data are transformed into a fictionalised account (such as, for example, Gullion's social fiction novel, *October Birds* (2016)). Flash ethnography consists of brief but complete stories (750-word essays, usually) which narrate moments that are themselves short but telling (see, for example, Syring and Offen 2017). McGranahan and Stone (2020) define it as:

> ... compressed and intense, saturated with vivid imagery and affect; and crucially, self-enclosed: each a discrete whole, rather than an excerpt from a larger project. One should begin in the middle rather than getting caught up in lengthy exposition, allowing each sentence to peel back another layer. And of course, like ethnography, the flash version is likewise accountable to the real, made from the tangled and charged texture of being-in-the-world and attuning ourselves also to the worlds of others.

The impressionist tale shares some commonalities with flash ethnography, particularly the researcher's non-detached perspective to portray special moments in time in order to draw the reader's attention to images – 'to make the reader feel, hear, see, smell, and taste what the storyteller describes ... to paint a vivid image coloured by the perspective of the writer's experience' (Bryan and Tippins 2005, 230).

4. An impressionist tale of interpreting in field missions

After a thorough process of reflection, it was decided that the impressionist tale would allow us to capture the essence of the fieldwork, to give its flavour without breaking neither the code of conduct set by the organisation, nor the deontological rules by which interpreters abide. We did not want to describe what exactly happened during the mission for fear of diverting the reader's attention from the essence of the events. Furthermore, we wanted to go beyond narrating events and facts to evoke unfamiliar

settings to allow the reader not only to know what happens, but also to show them the experiences as lived in that moment. The events could not be summed up in a chronological succession: only some events have the merit of crystallising several elements of these missions (Freels and Onwuegbuzie 2012). Furthermore, the impressionist tale has the merit of encouraging experimentation in the reporting and writing of qualitative research data, as stated by Skinner (2003). The narrative of his experience in a British Dependent Territory in the Eastern Caribbean just after it was destroyed by the eruption of a volcano was an interesting inspiration for us. Another impressionist tale worth noting is Bowen's (1954) account of a fieldwork mission in West Africa.

In the present impressionist tale, knowledge is fragmented: sometimes we go back and forth between the observations collected in the field and the memories revealed by the interpreters. In addition, elements that would have seemed vain or decorative in a realist ethnographic narrative have their place here. The characterisation of the participants, especially the interpreters, is fundamental in the narrative because the scope of the interpretive event is often measured in the light of the emotion it arouses in them. The feelings expressed by the participants are as essential as the interaction requiring interpretation itself. The textual identity is respected, the narrative is in the first person singular even though the authors sometimes step aside from the story to make some comments and remarks that we find relevant. The narrators use the present indicative, with a few exceptions, to immerse the reader in the scene as if they were present. As for the dramatic control of the tale, which according to Van Maanen (1988) is characterised by a rich and sometimes poetic prose, we think that the account that we present, whilst it may not be literary in nature, seeks to be an attractive story, based on direct, spontaneous and unfiltered emotion whilst remaining far from any artifice.

However, despite being a more creative and a freer form of telling, the impressionist tale must meet a certain number of characteristics: textual identity, fragmented knowledge and characterisation. In the paragraphs that follow we describe these characteristics through some examples taken from the impressionist tale that we created for our study. The examples that follow are part of the impressionist tale, but they do not necessarily follow the original order of the tale. The chosen order is meant to corroborate the main elements of an impressionist tale defined by Van Maanen.

Textual identity

Unlike the realist tale, where an objective description of the fieldwork is expected, or the confessional tale, where the researcher elaborates on the difficulties encountered and the solution found, the impressionist tale is told through the lens of the fieldworker via her impressions.

> As she walks down the hall of a prison, Clara sees bars with curtains drawn behind them, but she notices that something is moving in the cell. Initially, she chooses to keep it to herself, but the image remains in her mind and she finally decides, after much hesitation, to speak to the head of delegation. He decides to go and inspect the place and asks Clara and Hassan to accompany him. The head of delegation asks the guards to open the cell. He can see with his own eyes that there is something or someone in the cell that the guard did not want to show the delegation. Clara has mixed feelings. She is relieved to have drawn the delegation's attention to this cell and at the same time feels great unease at what it might be hiding. This memory still haunts her.

The visit to the psychiatric hospital leaves me unsatisfied. The meeting with the chief doctor is a brief moment of calm for us interpreters. It takes place in one language that all parties understand. Imad and I, the only interpreters present, however, almost automatically write the medical terms which are scattered throughout the conversation in our notebooks. The subsequent meeting with the doctors and nurses completes the extensive information provided by the chief doctor. I am anxious about visiting the patient pavilions but, at the same time, hope for it with all my heart. As for the prison, we all have a place in our imagination for what we commonly, cruelly, call madness. Working in the field gives us a human and humanitarian role that is in harmony with my own perception of my role as an interpreter.

In my notes, which I am rereading while writing this story, there is one element which keeps coming back in the words of my colleagues, during the mission but especially at the end of it: that of meeting people deprived of their liberty. The categories vary; we learn that, legally speaking, they are not the same: persons in pre-trial detention, convicted persons, minors, adults, men, women, women accompanied by children, convicted persons who are known to be political prisoners. The list seems endless but beyond any possible categorization, we call them all, we interpreters, the prisoners.

In writing these fragments of the tale about detention centre facilities, two main elements had to be combined: the very meticulous description of the prison incident as recounted by 'Clara' and 'Hassan' (the pseudonyms for two of the participant-researcher's colleagues who were interviewed) and the notes that the participant-researcher herself had taken concerning another prison visited during the same mission. Images from the two prisons overlap, and what started as an unconscious overlaid description of a place of detention is used consciously thereafter to anonymise the location and eliminate any traces that might identify it. The vivid image of the prison is immediately followed by another image drawn from a psychiatric hospital; the account does not tell us if these two visits took place simultaneously or on the same day but it is obvious that both places left the interpreters with very similar feelings. These feelings fell under a category that the researcher extrapolated from the notes and the interviews i.e. 'interpreting in places of detention'. As stated earlier, the account clearly reveals 'the doing' while in places of detention, not the 'doer' or 'the done'.

Fragmented knowledge

The impressionist tale has certainly a novelistic flavour that distinguishes it drastically from the other two typologies. It contains small details, allusions and snapshots without necessarily abiding to a rigid structure. The cultural knowledge is transmitted to the reader in fragments.

On a cold grey day, Imad and I leave the city behind us. According to schedule, winter was about to begin. We reach our destination a few hours later, after dark. A gentle temperature and a light breeze greet us. We both know that these are the last hours we have left of that relative serenity before we embark on a long marathon. We also know that we are already in the field; maybe we can even say that the field started at the city airport, when we were sitting in our seats waiting for departure. When we arrive, the outlines are blurry, and it is difficult for me to get an idea of the city that welcomes us covered in countryside darkness. A few streetlamps, with their pale light, hang over the street where our hotel is located. A message awaits us at reception, indicating the time at which the delegation meets to start the first day of work.

Imad intends to translate the delegation's final communiqué which would be read at a press conference. After the conference, questions are put to members of the delegation, and journalists ask members of the delegation for interviews. Outside the frame of the camera, we interpret the words exchanged. We were all exhausted. Our return flight will leave the same evening. I had a few hours of the afternoon to myself. I needed to walk, to stretch my legs after all the long journeys of the last few days. I especially needed to be alone. A new landscape rose before my eyes, a little sleepy town with stalls intended for tourists who seemed to have deserted them. I would like to take something home with me, I think of the delicious cakes that were often offered to us, then I think of the death row prisoner who asked our permission to bring some back to his cell. My stomach tightens, it appeared to have got dark without me realizing. I hurry towards the hotel.

In the first paragraph, arrival in the country is described in a vague but novelistic way. This allows the researcher to give an account of the beginning of any standard mission. Indeed, sentences such as 'before we embark on a long marathon' or 'maybe we could even say that the field started at the city airport' usually apply to any field mission, while the use of stylistic devices to describe the weather and the location of the hotel sets the stage for the reader without breaching the confidentiality principle.

In the second paragraph, cultural elements are presented in the form of phrases such as 'a little sleepy town with stalls intended for tourists' or 'I would like to take something home with me, I think of the delicious cakes that were often offered to us'. Both sentences reflect fragments of the social and cultural setting of the mission. Moreover, there is a clear alternation between factual events such as 'Imad intends to translate the delegation's final communiqué, which would be read at a press conference' and feelings such as 'I think of the death row prisoner who asked our permission to bring some (cakes) back to his cell'. Treating hard facts and sentiments on an equal footing is a salient feature of impressionist tale.

Characterisation

An impressionist tale is a story, and it is mainly for that reason that it is populated with characters with names, faces and feelings to be told.

The two members of the secretariat present the programme of the mission and outline the profiles of the members of the delegation with whom they had already worked. I gaze at them, a young woman and her grizzled colleague. I wonder what they are like on the ground? Nervous, calm, very hard-working? Practical information is given to us: what flight times to book, which hotel to stay in and the requirement to arrive and leave on the same days as the delegation. To me, all of these necessary steps, despite their purely practical aspects, seem very abstract.

Clara and Hassan cannot hold back their tears and spontaneously say, without consulting each other, that we must provide psychological support to the interpreters. Hassan interrupts and reiterates insistently: "what would give me the right to live in luxury when the majority of men, women and children live in misery?"

Unlike our male colleagues, Clara and I seem determined, above all, to hide, to go unnoticed. A kind of cover-up, which no one has explicitly asked of us, imposes itself on our minds before visiting the men's prison. We will impose the camouflage on ourselves even in the women's quarters, since the visits were often grouped together and included men, women and minors.

> Clara said she knew she had to avoid shimmering colours; she needed clothes suitable for the prison environment. Both of us, without consulting each other, wear trousers with large and long shirts and flat shoes. Our faces bear no make-up. I had taken off my earrings, remembering what a security guard once told me about the importance of not wearing necklaces or earrings that could be pulled. We had not received any instructions from the mission secretariat in this regard and we were all guided by common sense - which did not necessarily mean safety.

In the first paragraph about preparation, the objective is to engage the reader in the characterisation of the participants by suggesting what they might be like, while in the second paragraph (about psychological implications) the expression of the participants' feelings defines their respective characters, which are shown to be as important as the interpreting process per se. Although confidentiality is maintained by not revealing a specific incident that may be related to a particular place or situation, this does not by any means dilute the allusive power of the discourse. It is through the characterisation of the two participants – who both express their feelings by crying – that the need for psychological support is clearly stated, thereby giving more persuasive force to the account. The reader can also easily expand this understanding and apply it to any similar field mission.

The third paragraph (about decisions made by the interpreter) characterises the participants in a less elusive way by partially describing their physical appearance when going to the prison. While it is true that these details have a didactic function, it is also true that they can be engaging for the reader and thus, in a nuanced fashion, enable certain important concepts to be imparted, such as what to wear to interpret in a prison.

5. Conclusions

This article has discussed the various challenges that a researcher may face when carrying out an ethnography when she also works as an interpreter in the context of an international organisation, mainly keeping the confidentiality and anonymity of the data when writing the ethnographic account, and it has examined different potential solutions to overcome these difficulties. The positionality of the participant-researcher as an interpreter in the mission allowed her privileged access to the field and meant that participants were more willing to share their experiences with her. At the same time, one of the most challenging obstacles she faced was that of remaining faithful to the ethical principles of the organisation she serves and respecting the ethical principles of the interpreting profession. This included the issue of confidentiality, which has to be clearly defined at the outset of any ethnographic account. Confidentiality can vary from one organisation to another and can cover a large spectrum of possibilities. This leaves the scholar with their hands tied and one may wonder how the researcher, despite these strict conditions, can share the essence of a field experience through an ethnographic account.

Furthermore, these missions are usually highly stressful and emotionally draining. The interpreters must be able to come to terms with their emotions and measure their work against the yardstick of other unsettling human experiences. The often-dramatic accounts of witnesses to abuse are an integral part of this fieldwork. It is often the psychological impact of these missions that is remembered by interpreters, even years after the end of such a mission. This is why the experiences in field missions cannot be portrayed as

detached factual narratives given the emotional load of the interpreter's work. Therefore, using Bryan and Tippins (2005) words, we wanted to evoke a 'participatory sense in the viewer' by painting scenes taken from the field. This is what makes the impressionist story better able to relate the feelings of the interpreters as emotions cannot, by their nature, present an immutable scientific fact. It is the fluidity of human feelings that is best captured by an impressionist narrative, which seeks to capture a sensation of life and not to frame it in a Cartesian manner through rigid narrative structures.

Opting for an impressionist narrative allowed us to use words, metaphors and images to report on the work accomplished, which would have been difficult in a realist or confessional narrative. In addition, it allowed us to bridge the distance that separated us from the bygone moment of the mission and made it possible to tell the story strategically to reflect what matters most to the writer. That being said, this type of account is not flawless: it is, by definition, a way of painting an evocative picture of an experience that spanned several days in the field. The narrative does not claim precision and impartiality, especially since it is highly emotionally charged, and the tale cannot be fully representative. Moreover, impressionist accounts can go too far in transforming reflexivity into self-indulgence (Coffey 1999) or in overcoming the problem of self-denial in social sciences (Skinner 2003) which could lead to self-referential drifts when recounting field events and experiences.

It is fair to question the feasibility of carrying out an ethnography if confidentiality rules were to be more stringent. The harsher the confidentiality rules are, the more difficult it is for the researcher to anonymise the data. The more the narrator anonymises, the more the tale becomes abstract and difficult to grasp. A much higher level of abstraction is likely to dangerously divert the researcher from the objective of the study, namely to give meaning to the ethnographic exercise by making it useful for the community of practitioners and scholars. Therefore, researchers have to be aware of these complex limitations and to decide when an ethnographic account methodology must be abandoned. This is especially the case when strict censorship, particularly self-censorship, must be applied not only to respect confidentiality and anonymity but also to avoid sanctions and perhaps even reprisals.

Note

1. This study is part of a doctoral thesis carried out by the first author and supervised by the second author at the University of Geneva's Faculty of Translation and Interpreting (FTI). It has been approved by the University Ethics Committee.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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